

**SLIPPING INTO THE SHADOWS OF KYAI'S FIGURES:  
WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN INDONESIAN  
PESANTREN'S WEB OF POWER**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores women's efforts in challenging male authority within Indonesian *pesantren* (Islamic education institution). Historically, *pesantren* tradition did not involved women in its social and religious affairs, and the full authority was in the hand of *Kyai* (owner and leader of *Pesantren*). Later on, women, through figures of *Nyai* (wife, or daughters of *Kyai*), have started to get involve in *pesantren*'s life by helping *Kyai* in managing *pesantren*'s daily life, especially, in taking care of female *santri* (students). The paper investigates what kind of negotiations, conducted by these women, in dealing with *pesantren*'s patriarchal attitude so they can more participate in its 'public' and authority matters. Based on a qualitative research data, collected from fieldwork in selected *pesantren* around Indonesia, this paper argues that in order to maximize their contribution in *pesantren* web of power, *pesantren* women as *Nyai* actively try in any ways to change patriarchal concepts, to empower themselves, and to negotiate social changes.

**KEYWORDS:** women leadership, gender, Islam, patriarchal bargains, *pesantren*

**INTRODUCTION**

*Pesantren* is an Islamic educational institution, and one of the oldest religious education institution in Indonesia. It has been known for its significant contribution in Indonesian nation building. Structurally, *Pesantren*, at least, has three main related elements: *Kyai* (leader and teacher), *santri* (students), and *pondok* (dormitory). The interaction of these elements is known as *Pesantren* tradition. The history of *pesantren* development is always identical with male *santri*. In this case, the history of the establishment of *pesantren* was always started with the need of a *santri*, either based on his own initiative or his religious teacher's order, to spread Islam in selected areas that usually far away from his own homeland. In spreading Islam, a male *santri* often had to face hard challenges. Because of that, unsurprisingly, in the past founders of *pesantren* were mostly men, and known as *kyai*, the founder and caretaker of *pesantren*. *Kyai* has a significant role in influencing educational system in a *pesantren*, and *santri*'s character. *Kyai*'s position becomes special as his *santri* usually follows his commands and suggestions. It can be said that *pesantren* life tends to be dominated by men, either as *santri* or *kyai*. Leadership authority in *pesantren* tends to be patriarchal. *Kyai* is a dominant factor within this tradition.

Later on, women *pesantren* has started accept the presence of female figures through figure of *Nyai* (*Kyai*'s wife). *Pesantren* has also started accepting female *santri*. In 1930 *Pesantren* Denanyar Jombang formally accepted female *santri*. The acceptance of female *santri* in the

*pesantren* forms a new breakthrough in the context of Indonesian Islam. It is the breakthrough in Muslim education world, related on gender division, although it depends on the flexibility of *pesantren*'s authority (Srimulyani, 2012). The presence of female *santri* is a key factor that increase the involvement of *Nyai* in *pesantren*'s life as *Kyai*'s assistance in managing *pesantren* and looking after female *santri*, although full authority is still in the hand of *kyai*.

Because of *pesantren*'s significant contribution within Indonesia communities and its unique tradition, there have been many research on it, including Dhofier (1982), Rahardjo (1985), Budiwati (2001), Anshori (2004), Malik (2004), Turmudi (2004), Nafi (2007), and Apipudin (2013). As *Kyai* is a dominant figure in *pesantren*, it can be said that most research tend to be more focus on functions of *Kyai* within the life activities of *pesantren* and in their communities, such as Apipudin's research (2013). It shows that there is a decrease of *Kyai*'s authority in their communities, related on political choices. It is argued that the decrease is caused by two main factors. Firstly, the change of *Kyai*'s role within *pesantren* itself. Social changes from outside *pesantren* which caused *pesantren* have to adapt them, is another factor of the decrease of *Kyai*'s authority.

But, there have been not many research focusing on the contribution of women in *pesantren* web of power, such as role of *Nyai*, wives or daughters of *Kyai*, in managing and developing of *pesantren*. There have been some research on the contribution of women in an institution's web of power, or research on the way women gain their significant roles in their societies. For example, research conducted by Elfira (2013, and 2015) show Minangkabau women's leadership activities and their negotiations regarding the implementation of Islamic laws and *Adat* laws in Indonesia after reform era in order to maximize their contribution in private areas in their daily lives. But the research do not include yet women's roles in the *pesantren*, such as role of *Nyai*, wives or daughters of *Kyai*, in managing and developing of *pesantren*. It can be argued that *pesantren* life is a combination of private and public, and political arenas. Some research, such as Srimulyani (2012), and Wafiroh (2013), expose *Nyai* figures and their involvement in *pesantren*'s life, but, arguably, their research more focus on how gender relations work in *pesantren*. It is still needed research focused on how web of power works in *pesantren*, especially on what kind of tools are used by women in gaining power in *pesantren*'s daily life.

This research, aims to complete research on the relation of gender, Islam, and power, investigates what kind of negotiations, conducted by these women, in dealing with *pesantren*'s patriarchal attitude so they can more participate in *pesantren*'s "public" and authority matters. There are two main theories, used in analysing the issue. The first theory, regarding interconnection of gender and power, is proposed by Radtke and Stam, who says:

'female' and 'male' are shaped not only at the micro-level of everyday social interaction but also at the macro-level as social institutions control and regulate the practice of gender. Indeed, one consequence of the analysis contained here is to say that gender relations are power relations (1994: 13).

Since the issue is about the way women negotiate patriarchal attitudes in *pesantren*'s life, an argument, proposed by Deniz Kandiyoti will be also used in analyzing it. Kandiyoti argues that women strategize within a set of concrete constraints, identified as patriarchal bargains, as expressed:

Different forms of patriarchy present women with distinct “rules of the game” and call for different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression (Kandiyoti 1988:274).

In order to explore this issue, in collecting qualitative data in selected *pesantren* in Indonesia between 2015-2018, the research uses qualitative methods. It is because the methods can capture the contextual, real-life, everyday experiences of the individual interviewed (Lopez 2003:7). The activities include participant observation, deep interview and survey conducting. Extensive segments of the in-depth interviews will be included in this paper. In order to protect their privacy, names of some informants will be disguised.

### **The Involvement of Women in Pesantren’s Web of Power: Slipping into the Shadows of Kyai’s Figures**

*“Kesetaraan gender tidak merusak agama  
(Gender equality does not ruin religion)”*

The quotation above is expressed by Masriyah Amva, the head of *Pesantren Kebon Jambu Cirebon*, where *Kongres Ulama Perempuan* (Convention of female *Ulama*, was conducted in 25-27 April 2017. Amva came into power after her husband passed away, and there is no right person to replace his position as the head of their *pesantren*. Their son, who was expected to be the next *pesantren*’s leader, was still young and did not have enough ability yet to lead *pesantren*. Moreover, other male senior members of *pesantren* did not show interest in dealing with *pesantren*’s burdens. In a public speech, organised by Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia in 27 November 2017, amva told that in the beginning PP Kebon Jambu was a patriarchal traditional *pesantren*. As a *Nyai*, she used to stand behind her husband, who was a charismatic *Kyai*. When her husband was still alive, she felt that people tended to underestimate and disrespect her. According to Amva, the situation might be caused by her total dependence to her husband. When her husband passed away, her position as a wife of the *pesantren* leader (late), forced her to take over *Pesantren*. She has become “*Kyai*” for all her *pesantren santri*, either males or females. Under Amva’s leadership, their *pesantren* has developed and has changed from a traditional and patriarchal *pesantren* into modern *pesantren*, practicing gender equality values. Nira Yuval-Davis states the importance of home, and women as homemakers in the process of ethnicity building, as cultural rules and their practices are transmitted to the next generation at home, most strongly by women (1997). Arguably, Amva’s case suits with Yuval’s Davis’s argument. Through “her home”, the *pesantren*, Amva, who is also a poet, strongly promotes gender equality and pluralism ideas. Because of her activities, Amva, whose life story has been filmed and written by journalists from Japan, Malaysia, and Germany, is well known as gender and pluralism activist from *pesantren*.

Besides Amva, there some women who also achieve important positions in *pesantren*’s leadership circle. The achievement can be a result of the changes of study orientation of *Kyai*’s family’s. As an impact of the spreading of modernisation values, many main members of *kyai*’s family, including *kyai*’s daughters, have taken formal study outside *pesantren*. After finishing their formal study, they go back to *pesantren*, and, to some degrees, start to change leadership systems in *pesantren*, such as minimazing *Kyai*’s “single

hand” authority. The new systems also give wider portion for *pesantren*’s female members, who got formal study degrees, to get involve in organising *pesantren*. Indonesian government’s gender equality policies, empowering Indonesian women in general, also contribute in increasing women’s involvement in organising *pesantren*’s life, such as in PP NH 2, located in Singosari, Malang. The *pesantren*, built in 1 April 2007, is own and lead by *Nyai M*, a daughter of a famous *Kyai* (late), who built *Pesantren NH 1*. Although she said that her husband has also got involve in developing the *pesantren*. It seems that *Nyai M* herself is the main manager and teacher of *pesantren*, consisting of 100 *santri*., with the help of 20 assistants (teachers). Besides leading her *pesantren*, *Nyai M*, called *Bunda* (mother) by her *santri*, has also own business, running from her home, to financially support her own family and *pesantren*. Her husband, a government public servant, does not get involve in her own business. Dowler, Carubia, and Szczygiel (2005) argue that home is ‘a dynamic site of re-evaluation and mediation of power relationships’. Their argument can be used in analysing power relationship in *Nyai M*’s “home”, consisting of her own family and *pesantren*’s family members. Based of *Nyai M* activities, it can be said that *Nyai M* is the ‘de facto’ leader and breadwinner of her ‘home, while her husband is ‘the formal head of family’. *Nyai M*’s case can also be taken as an example how a “housewife” can also share a position of a “house leader”. Joanne Hollows (2007:45) argues that “feminism ... needs to produce ways of conceptualizing domestic femininity that are not simply reduced to a singular and fixed image of housewife.” *Nyai M*’s case has showed that there is no fixed housewife image, and being a housewife is not always linked to subordination as argued by Hollows (2007).

Deniz Kandiyoti argues that women strategize within a set of concrete constraints, identified as patriarchal bargains (1998). Kandiyoti’s argument (1988), is relevant to investigate how women within *pesantren* bargain with imposed patriarchal values that restrict their power with various tactics, as showed by strategy of TM, a former of a private university rector and wife of *Kyai* in a *pesantren* in Magetan area . TM, who holds Doctoral degree, willingly decides to be more focus on her position as a wife of *Kyai*, as she expressed; “I prefer to do my job as a wife, who accompanies her husband”.

Being a housewife, she cannot be a member of the *Pesantren* Highest Council. As a result, she cannot replace her husband’s position to be the head of *pesantren*. The head of *Pesantren* is chosen among male members of this Council. But, being a housewife of *Kyai* has given her some privileges related to power, such as being her husband’s right person in leading *pesantren*. TM, who has also got *Nyai* title because of her wife status, has also got role as her husband’s right person. This role has given a chance for TM to get involve in *pesantren*’s leadership circle, and to give some influences in decision making. The other example can be taken from *Nyai A*’s case. *Nyai A* is a wife of *Kyai* (late) in a *pesantren* in Jombang (East Java). After her husband, a founder of an Islamic education institution in Jombang, passed away, *Nyai* has been asked to be the head of the Institution Highest Council. This Council has responsibility in electing the head of the Islamic education institution, chosen among male members. Although the head of the institution is still in the hand of one of her male children, through this position, *Nyai A* has formally also become a part of this Islamic education’s leadership circle.

The cases above are an example of the way women involve in *pesantren* web of power. In order to maximize their contribution in *pesantren* web of power. *Pesantren* women as *Nyai* actively try in any ways to change patriarchal concepts, to empower themselves, and to negotiate social changes. The cases above show that there have been some changes of their function from only as an informal mediator of *pesantren* authority to as an active member of

*pesantren*'s web of power and as one of its decision maker. However, cases also show that women in *pesantren* have still face some difficulties to reach the highest position in the *pesantren*.

## CONCLUSION

There are some main conclusions can be taken, based on analysis of data, collected from fieldwork in selected *pesantren*. The first conclusion is that *pesantren* women have actively tried changing patriarchal concepts, still practiced, to some extends in *pesantren*'s life, by empowering themselves, and negotiating social changes in order to maximize their contribution in *pesantren* web of power. Secondly, women involvement in *pesantren* web of power can be seen from the changes of their function from only as an informal mediator of *pesantren* authority to as an active member of *pesantren*'s web of power and as one of its decision makers. It can also be concluded that as a result of the implementation of modern concept in organizing *pesantren*, women have been given wider roles in the authority system. The last conclusion is that although women have more active and given more opportunities in *pesantren* web of power, by exploring and using their position as the wives or daughters of *Kyai*, men, as *Kyai*, are still hold main formal authority in *pesantren*.

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